

## THE LOOTERS

The Story of a Thrilling Night in Paris and Its Bizarre Aftermath.

At the back of the room, beyond the marble-topped counter of the American bar—America is to the bars of Paris what England is to her tailors—the little tables were spaced widely; the clientele of the place were of that kind which frequently needs privacy. Without, the moderate traffic of the Rue Daunon, the leakage from the spate of the boulevard, passed past its door; within, two or three ornate ladies sat each alone at a table with her untouched glass of liqueur before her, motionless, wordless, sunk in a seeming of gentle melancholy, and in the furthest corner Mr. James Smith held forth across his table for the enlightenment and profit of his two young friends.

"Neumann!" he was saying in accents of surprise. "Pony Neumann! Mean to tell me you don't know Pony Neumann? Well, you certainly ought to know Pony. It's an education for any man!"

He himself was a man of about 30 years of age, bullet headed and thick in the neck. His clothes and linen had a showy suppleness; the whole of his accoutrement was choice and costly, and with it went that manner of sophistication, that art of gesture and attitude, which is only acquired to perfection by those to whom bars and race courses and gaming houses are the familiar landmarks of life. His blunt featured face had a sort of callous cheeriness, but neither the grace of his manner nor the gloss of his equipment availed to hide the feral and dangerous quality that inhabited the man as a flame inhabits a lantern. Of his two young companions, one looked like a jockey and the other like a curate; nevertheless, neither was a horseman nor an ecclesiastic.

"Well, what about 'im?" queried the counterpart curate, restively. "What is 'e, any 'owf'?"

"What is 'e?" echoed James Smith. "He's everything that you're not, me lad, and everything you'll never be. When you're talking about Pony you want to be careful; he's got more friends than a pretty millionaires, and I don't know the man that can say he ever got the better of him. Fellers like you—"

"But what is 'e?" interrupted the other. "What's 'e do? Us three—well, Tim an' me, our game is smashing stumers: you're a jeweler; but what's this 'ere Pony? That's what I was askin'!"

"Oh!" Mr. James Smith was galled. "Well, I don't know just what you'd call him. He's in a class by himself. January till March, you'll find him at Monte Carlo or Biarritz; then a month or two in Paris; then over to London for the season and back to Trouville or Ostend about August. Then he'll trot off to Caribbad, maybe, an' in the winter you're likely to hear of him at Cairo or thereabouts. Wherever the swells are—the real swells and the real money—there you'll find old Pony holding his own with the best of 'em and not losing by it, you bet! Why, if that feller was to write a book, there'd be scores of 'em—scores, I tell you, from lords an' bishops an' birds o' paradise o' that kind down to members o' parliament an' stock brokers—that'd never be able to show their faces again."

"I see, he's got the style for it. Man of about forty-five, I should say, and plumpish, with a kind of short spoken heartiness about him and a friendly look; you'd take him to be a colonel in the army or a lively kind of country squire. And he's got that trick o' dressing—you know! The minute you see it you know it's the right thing. I've seen him on the Promenade des Anglais at Nice. Two or three of 'em coming along together, General This an' Sir John That an' old Pony all together—Pony doin' the talkin', too—an' I give you my word that out o' the bunch o' them Pony was the one I could have been afraid of an' called 'sir' when I was speakin' to him."

The youth who looked like a jockey coughed consumptively, wiped his lips, and glanced at his handkerchief as he returned it to his pocket. "Yes," he drawled. "Blackmail's his game, then?"

Mr. Smith hesitated. "I dunno," he said thoughtfully. "You can hardly call it blackmailin' when Pony does it. And it isn't his only game, anyhow; Pony never misses a chance. Why, talkin' of Nice, there used to be a feller down there, the Honorable Samuel Barleigh. Young feller he was; son of a lord, but his family had kicked him out, and he spent his time busily and solemnly going to the devil. He was regularly tottering from side to side between delirium tremens and suicide; I never saw such a beastly sight as that chap when he really got going. Well, Pony had a look at him an' put out feelers for information about him an' his people, and when he'd learned all he wanted to know he took charge of him."

The Honorable Sam had been in drink cure homes before till most of 'em were sick of him; there didn't seem to be a blue ribbon doctor in the world that could handle him; but Pony was a new experience for the gay lad. Pony took him to some filthy hole on the top of a snowy old Alp where you needed wings for goin' up an' where you were apt to get a harp and a halo, too, when you started to come down, and there he put him through it. He made him do winter sports till he was black an' blue all over; he cut off his liquor, his smokes, an' his dope, and he exercised a friendly influence over him till the Honorable Sam couldn't call his soul his own.

"And in the spring he took him home and presented him to his family. They'd never



By Perceval Gibbon

"It was to be in a certain big cafe on the boulevard at three in the afternoon.

"We'll be there," said Pony. "And you pretend not to know us. Probly we'll be able to fix things up for you. 'Cos I'm blowed if I'm goin' to have a lot of crooks like this come trespassin' on ground that I discovered for myself."

"He's got the loot an' he'll be gone in a moment," moaned Pony. Then suddenly he clapped his hand to his forehead and gave a sort of whispering shout.

"It's him," he said. "It must be—it must be! Gosh, what a genius! Come on, Jim; we'll go over to them now."

"He got up, took his cane and gloves, and strolled across, me with him. I didn't understand at all but I cleared the air for action in case a punch should be wanted and held my tongue. Pony was fine—smiling and lofty and more like a colonel than ever. The pair of 'em looked up as we came alongside their table.

"'Hullo!' said Pony, rifiable and of handed. 'I didn't know you two knew each other.' He nodded to his lordship and then turned to the other. 'You're lookin' very well, Casey.'

"There was a moment or two of silence, broken only by the fall of his lordship's jaw. The bald man stared up at Pony as if he was the devil. Pony went on smiling.

"Who—who are you callin' Casey?" demanded the bald man.

"Why, you, o' course," said Pony. "Now, don't you start being silly with me, 'cos I haven't the patience. Sit down, Jim!"

"He pulled himself out a chair and we sat down, one on each side o' the bald man, where he'd have to turn his back on one of us if he wanted to start anything with the other. His lordship was still goggling at the pair of us.

"Well," said Pony, "any complaints? You aren't goin' to call in a policeman, are you, Casey? I wouldn't if it was you."

"My name's not Casey," snarled the other. "The man named Casey is dead and buried, an' this man killed him."

"I know," nodded Pony, "and if you don't want him brought to life in about ten seconds to explain where you got that other corpse you hand over that envelope which his lordship just gave you."

"He laid his open hand flat on the table and waited. The other glared at him, and Pony just smiled at him. Me, I'd rather he'd pull a gun on me than smile at me like that; but then, you see, I know him. And after a bit it worked. The bald man let his breath go in a loud puff and fetched out the envelope and put it in Pony's hand.

"How did you know?" he said in a natural voice.

"His lordship got his thoughts in order at that. 'Are you Casey?' he cried. 'You—you intend scoundrel. I'll—I'll—'

"Pony turned on him. 'Now, now!' he said. 'What's all this noise? After all the trouble that Jim and I have taken to break out like this! I'm ashamed of you!' It was as if he'd been scolding a noisy child, and Casey was him, all right—grinned at it.

"You see," Pony explained to him, "in my humble opinion you overdid it. You were knocked out with a bottle while you'd a gun in your hand, and there was that silly unnecessary deal at poker, and the fact that your three friends, with a gold mine all to themselves, took in a fourth. But the thing that finally gave you away—was—pardon:—that head of yours."

"You see, once I'd got my brains to working, it was clear enough that a long haired man with a beard couldn't choose a better disguise than a head like a bladder of hard. The only thing that still puzzles me is your dead body."

"Casey grinned again. 'Well,' he said, "maybe there's a better disguise for a man with the police after him than a five hundred franc funeral, but it's good enough for me. An' that corpse—it's only a question of biding your time and the Seine is certain to contribute an unknown Frenchman with a black beard which a few obligin' friends can go along and identify."

"But there's one thing that puzzles me: I put in. 'You ain't got a mark nor a scar on you. Where'd all that blood come from, then?'

"Blood?" he says. "O, that!" and he laughs. "He provided the blood," he says, nodding at his lordship. "It wasn't a champagne bottle he hit me with. It was bungundy and that was the blood."

"His lordship gasped. "I've had enough of this," he snaps to Pony. "Give me that money and I'm off."

"Pony stared at him. "Give you the money!" he said. "Why, it isn't yours; you gave it to Mr. Casey here. What the deuce should I give you the money for?"

"D' you want me to call a policeman in?" he cried.

"Yes," said Pony and Casey together.

"That was enough for him and he shambled off, his very back blaspheming as he went. Pony and Casey and me sat and smiled at each other.

"Well," said Casey. "I suppose we split fifty-fifty?"

"I suppose not!" answered Pony sharply. "There'll be no split in this. His lordship was my private property before you ever heard of him and I'll have no poaching on my preserves, the late Mr. Casey. Remember that, if you please!"

"An' what about me?" I chimed in. "It was you that asked me to help in this; don't I get anything?"

"He had stood up while he was answering Casey and now he nodded down to me.

"Yes, Jim," he said kindly. "You've been useful; you certainly deserve something. Lemme see! Yes, Jim; I'll let you off that two hundred francs you owe me!"

"He smiled and nods and off he goes swinging his cane. O it certainly is an education for a man to know old Pony Neumann!"

(Copyright: 1922: By The Chicago Tribune)

astonished and startled. It was well done, but—he nodded at me like a sleepy horse—'I'm a close observer, don't you know, and I saw through it. "Why, what's the matter?" asked the American. "Are you drunk?"

"No," I said. "Not nearly drunk enough to stand that kind of deal."

"He laid the cards down before him and started to get up. I jumped up, too, and so did the others.

"If you're trying to say I'm not dealing straight," he shouted, and I pointed a finger at him.

"You dealt yourself a card from the bottom of the pack, you sharper," I answered.

"Why, you swine," he shouted. They were all around me and I stepped back against the buffet where the bottles were.

And all at once I saw the bearded man with a pistol in his hand. I had my hand on a champagne bottle, and I stepped forward and swung it at him. I got him on the side of the head—a clinking fine bang—and the bottle flew to pieces in my hand and down he went."

Mr. James Smith laughed. "It was funny to see him while he told about it," he said. "Like a little girl tellin' how she killed a nasty big wasp—proud and horrified, you know. But the rest of the story was queer."

"The minute the bearded fellow went down two of the English chaps got hold of his lordship and dragged him back, and the third knelt down above the fallen man. His lordship was still kicking and plunging in the hands of the fellows who were holding him when this third man got up and held out his hands dripping with blood. 'You've killed him!' he says. 'Let him go now,' he tells the other two. 'We've got to think what to do with a bottle after he'd drawn a gun you'd need identifying and burying—not him!'

Old Pony nodded. "Yes, there's that, he said, thoughtfully.

"And then," I went on, "it doesn't sound real to me that three poker sharps would need to fumble a deal so badly as all that in order to squeeze the juice out of his lordship here. And which of the three Englishmen was a doctor to make sure the man was dead so quickly? And why have they taken in this messenger chap? And why are they so blamed modest and cheap to perfect little gentlemen."

"Presently Pony nudged me with his elbow: he'd seen our man flinch where he sat; and in from behind us and close past our table walks the blessed messenger. I glanced up sort of absent minded and got a good look at him. He certainly was a miscellaneous sort of creature. Young, you'd say; not more than thirty, by the gait of him; but on his face was a pair of big, round spectacles and from his collar up there wasn't a hair on him. He took off his hat as he sat down opposite his lordship, and he showed a dome like a billiard ball or an egg. An ordinary bald man has got fringes or wisps somewhere, but this freak wasn't so much bald as naked; it was downright indecent to sit there, beaming softly through his blinks with his skull shining through his scalp like that."

"His lordship stayed, yet old Pony understood. 'I ought to be used that for myself,' he said to him. 'If my little—er bit of information is worth a couple of hundred to you now an' again just to save unpleasantness, this affair, with the guillotine or New Caledonia behind it is worth more than a paity three thousand now and then. It's worth all you've got. What would you do about this business, Jim?'

"'O, me!' I said. "I'm a rough, rude man. I'd get that messenger into a room an' prevail on him to talk—yes, even if I had to sit him on a stove till he did! I'd want him to tell me which of those three fellows slipped a knife into Casey when he pulled his gun, 'cos I've hit a man with a bottle myself in my time and he didn't bleed so lavish."

"Pony sat thinking for a while. "First thing is to get a look at this bald headed messenger," he said. "One of us might know him by sight. Where have you got to meet him and hand over the money?"

"Over at the other table the bald man was still smiling kindly as his lordship passed over a big envelope.